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Questionable Textbook Statements

Some time ago, there was a suggestion in *The News Letter* that it might be useful to call attention to statements in English texts which tend to confuse the thinking of students. Many of these occur in discussions of grammar.

For instance, the statement devised to give students the necessary knowledge concerning the sentence frequently runs something like this, from a recent text: "A sentence is a group of words which expresses a single, complete thought, or a group of very closely related thoughts." Can you not see the pleased look of supreme enlightenment come to the face of the student who reads this definition? Or, can you? Yet, this is approximately the statement teachers have glibly recited to me for forty years. It is a conditioned reflex. Given the question, the answer comes automatically. And the fact is that it has no meaning whatever. Imagine some G. I. attempting to enlighten a native of a tropical island about snow by saying, "Snow is *neige*." A useful definition for teaching has a predicate which sets the limits of meaning in terms which are within the thought habits of the student. No student can define what is meant by "a complete thought." If a "complete thought" can be expressed in one sentence why write a paragraph—or a book? the simple fact that can be taught about the sentence is that it has a subject and a predicate.

One statement which I thought had been eliminated from texts a generation ago came up recently in a freshman text: "Some adjectives like round, perfect, and unique cannot be compared, for the quality which they name is definite and exists only in one degree." Statements similar to this occurred in the texts used in the 'nineties, and they still come up in classes. When I ask why round cannot be compared, the reply usually is that "if a thing is round it cannot be any rounder"! Dickens said that "Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail." And he added that he was inclined to "regard a coffin-nail as the deadiest piece of ironmongery." I can think of no quality more "definite" than that of being dead, but Dickens had no difficulty using the superlative degree of comparison.

There are two errors in the statement about the comparison of adjectives. In the first place, the fact that the quality named "exists only in one degree" has nothing to do with the possibility of the comparison of the adjective which is used to symbolize that quality. In the second place, roundness does exist in various degrees. The word round refers to a shape

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ENGLISH AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

By Dorothy Canfield Fisher

Now is the time we are told for all good citizens to rally in defense of the liberal arts. The need is both real and pressing. Yet we will fight better if before we plunge into the melee we pause a little to consider two questions: "Who are the enemy?" and, "exactly what are we defending?" It will not do to throw the blame on "the bourgeoisie". There are of course, as there always have been, some men and women so literal-minded that they understand nothing except rudimentary matters of fact. For them, as for William James' dog, the western sky blazing with gold and crimson brings only the reminder that it is just about supper time. For them education can do little. Even sympathy is out of place since they don't know what they are missing.

But—and it is a vitally important "but"—neither can they do much to influence education. There are not enough of them for that. For Flaubert and his school were wrong in thinking that everyone outside a little circle of illuminati are as the beasts that perish. Emerson (for all his up-in-the-air Transcendentalism) was nearer the actual facts of the case when he wrote: "The people imagine they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics." Well, if that is true, then perhaps our task is not so much to fight as to state our case so that it may be understood and accepted by the great majority, the middle-of-the-roads, the plain people on whose support public education rests, for whose benefit all democratic education is intended.

The prospect is far from daunting. To be sure this great majority at present seems to be swinging toward a rather meager practical view. That is natural enough. A world war, a free-spending paper-profit inflation, a black depression and then another greater war, all in thirty years, has left us somewhat in the situation of shipwrecked sailors. We do well to take stock of our desert island, carefully budget our resources, intangible as well as material. We can't afford the luxury of purely decorative or ornate education. To such a proposition we can all say "amen".

But exactly what is meant by a "purely decorative or ornate education"? To take a concrete example, do those words imply a valid criticism of yesterday's and today's English teaching? An honest answer to that question is "Yes, but not to any great extent." Teachers are only human. At times they yield to common human foibles. The more thoroughly trained in scholarship they are, the more they tend to insist

on recondite side-issues of philology, miles above the heads of their pupils, to spend an immoderate amount of time on some favorite though extremely minor author. Now, more than ever, they should remember that school terms pass quickly and first things must come first. Not that I am hostile to scholarship. Even the most hair-splitting research has its place. I merely suggest that its place is not in the class-room. What belongs there above all is exercise in learning to use the tool of language, learning to convey information, to express ideas in the simplest possible adequate words. Does that mean Basic English and bleak declarative sentences? At times something of that sort may be called for, but not always—not often. For, while the ability to write simply and clearly is something that everyone should master, is indeed the only sure foundation for effective literary expression, still it is no more than the foundation. And a building that never rises above the ground level is no great achievement.

We use language to convey information. We also use it to convey ideas. And that is not so simple. Baedeker's guide, for instance, is excellent in helping us find our way through winding streets from the railway station to Chartres Cathedral. It does not tell us in any convincing way why we should take the trouble to go there, why we should not rather pass our time drinking vermouth or eating patisserie at the restaurant du Grande Monarque. It cannot get across to the eager but uninstructed overseas tourist any grasp of Gothic art's superlative co-ordination between structure and decoration, its association with the rich culture of the 13th century. For that higher sort of understanding we must turn to the anything-but-basic English of Henry Adams.

Language is meant to convey information. Yes, but information about what? Men and women are only partially rational animals, interested only occasionally in turning "the cam 'A' until the valve 'B' is firmly seated." Four-fifths or more of our real life is colored by the emotions. The husband, no matter how devoted, who finds nothing more to write home than: "Dear Wife, This letter leaves me well and I hope it finds you the same. Sincerely yours . . ." fails miserably as a writer. I don't deny that he achieves simplicity, but he ignores the other, equally important, half of my definition. His words are totally inadequate to his message.

Even those who see nothing ahead but the most severely practical

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A Letter From CEA's First President

Now that we have the CEA a-going, I hope that younger men and women will see in it an opportunity and a fulfillment of hopes, and that we shall find among them some who will carry on with vigor and enthusiasm what we had begun. Things were looking good, and then the war came. If the CEA survives the war—and its continuing solvency proves it is doing so—it will probably come into its own.

I suspect, however, that college teachers, unlike preparatory school teachers, are not "liners." Perhaps, being mostly university bred, they look upon teaching as of minor importance, scholarship having real dignity and prestige. I also suspect that one reason why large numbers of them join the MLA is that they feel that this has dignity and prestige. Merely to belong to it is a professional "must." To contribute to its publications is the short road to promotion. However they may criticize it, they still feel that they must join it, even if they never go to its meetings and never read its publications. Many approve of our intentions and wish us success, but do not bother to join. After the war we may grow again, if, as I think, there will be a rapid increase in interest in English and the creative arts.

As for the *News Letter*, it is brief, amusing, and fresh, and is therefore read. Of course I have heard it criticized as "superficial" and even as "trivial", but this from solemn youngsters. I always suggest that they write something important and profound and send it to you, as a sample of what you should publish. I doubt, however, if you have ever had a contribution from one of them. These critics think the CEA should have a magazine, but they are very vague about what such a magazine should be. I am wondering, in fact, whether young college teachers do or can produce the sort of articles and essays—or at least good enough ones—to supply the CEA magazine they talk of with papers which the profession is hungering for. Teachers who write critical rather than research papers have, anyway, a medium now in *College English* (which, you will remember, was suddenly transmogrified after our organization meeting). There are also the *Kennedy*, *Partisan*, and other reviews, which publish the kind of thing such critics think a CEA magazine should publish. If we ever did have a magazine, I should hope that we might not simply multiply the sort of thing that has always led a precarious existence because it was too bright and good for human nature's daily food. We should prob-

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THE NEWS LETTER

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BURGES JOHNSON

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Editorial

All closely settled areas today have their local broadcasting stations, which first of all must yield a profit to their owners, and second, must fill up the time allotted to them, and (third in importance) provide their listeners with worthwhile programs.

The general average can be raised slightly by means of a national hook-up, filling scattered hours with programs heard throughout the nation. But most of their hours are filled at the lowest possible cost by local talent. Many so-called artists who need the advertising volunteer their services; and news casting and commenting are taken care of by anyone in the office theoretically able to read a daily bulletin or glean from the local newspaper.

Unfortunately, gleaming and placing emphasis where it belongs call for a background of general intelligence; and broadcasting of today's news calls for at least an elementary knowledge of world geography. But staff work in a broadcasting studio calls for nothing more than a knowledge of certain techniques which can be acquired by imitation.

All over this country the wave lengths are pulsating with the adumbrations of poverty-stricken mentalities; while proprietors of local stations from Portland to Portland are praying that the war may soon end, and news sources cease to be located in France or Germany or Poland or Russia or the Balkans. No matter how small the community in this country, there are sure to be many citizens in it who do not enjoy maltreatment of foreign place-names; and others, including advertisers, who favor correct English over the air.

President Henry Canby announced in Sept. NEWS LETTER his appointment of a Nominating Committee to present a slate of officers and directors for the coming year. Balloting on these nominations will be by mail. Members who wish to suggest nominations are urged to send them before Dec. 1 to the Committee Chairman, Thomas O. Mabbott, Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., New York City; or to one of the following: Professor J. L. Vaughan, Univ. of Va.; Benjamin Boyce, Municipal Univ. of Omaha; Amanda Ellis, Colorado College; Amy V. Hall, Univ. of Washington, Seattle. Officers to be elected are a president, two vice presidents, and four directors,—to succeed Wm. C. DeVane, Elizabeth C. Manwaring, W. O. Sypherd, whose terms expire, and Theodore Morrison, resigned. Wide geographical distribution should be kept in mind.

Your Secretary has had several requests for additional copies of that example of William Gowdy's typographical art, the sixteenth century tribute to Aqua Vitae, which was distributed to members as a supplement to the NEWS Letter more than a year ago. A considerable number of copies still remain, and will be supplied to members for Christmas purposes at 5 cents per copy, or six for 25 cents. Prudence suggests that they should not be sent as Christmas cards to minors.

May we urge the suggestion, made at greater length in the Sept. issue, that where two or three or more colleges are geographically close together, their English teaching staffs arrange for a Saturday luncheon and afternoon conference on "Post-War English Problems", to which all neighboring English teachers shall be invited, regardless of membership in this or any other organization. This office will cooperate in any possible way to help make it a success.

Biological argument has no place in a college-English periodical. But complaints have reached us as to the anatomy of the Owl which has appeared several times upon this page. Your editor is not a strigiform expert but refers all quibblers to the artist who is art editor of the NEW YORKER, and should know something about night birds. He has turned our inquiries aside with lofty dignity, murmuring into his beard some reference to Scotiaptex Nebulosa. But we find in our correspondence files the brief note which accompanied the original drawing. It reads: "Dear Editor, I hope this is an owl. Yours, Rea Irwin."

A LETTER FROM CEA'S FIRST PRESIDENT

(Continued from Page 1)

ably find that its contributors would be mostly experienced writers who happened to be interested in our ideals. I suggest that an interesting topic for discussion in the NEWS Letter would be: What sort of magazine should CEA publish? A number of subsidiary topics are suggested by this one:

Should the magazine be primarily an organ of information and opinion or an organ of professional news? What departments should it contain? Should it deal at all with curricula and methods of teaching? And—omnibus question—is another magazine needed and if so in what way could it accomplish something not now accomplished by existent magazines?

To return to the NEWS Letter. As I have understood your editorial policy, it has been—at least in part—to discover what English as taught in college is or should be. I have read a number of excellent articles on that subject that you have published. I am beginning to wonder, however, whether the term 'liberal education' has not had its day and should not be junked. Mark Van Doren's book is eloquent, but bothers me for reasons I cannot detail here. I am equally bothered by the current assumption that English is only the tail of the social studies dog. I seem to sense such an assumption in books like De Voto's *The Literary Fallacy*, though no doubt it is unconscious. He seems to have jumped out of one fallacy into another. I am also irritated by the notion that seems popular that there is only one kind of sound education (the so-called 'liberal education', for example), for there are as many kinds of sound education as there are types of mind. But there are really only three or four types of mind. It is one of my convictions that, on the intellectual side, American education has long suffered from streamlined, quantity production; and this in the graduate schools most of all, and least in the lowest grades of grammar schools.

Some day we shall realize that education costs money, though not so much as a war. Then we shall perhaps discover that, as you intimated in a recent editorial, the central situation is a student and a teacher; that to get enough good teachers is expensive; and that any amount of money spent on good teachers is well spent. I suggest then that in the NEWS Letter we might have some discussions of the practical problem of educating millions, and from the point of view that there are, as I have said, as many types of education (and of English teaching) as there are types of mind. Theories of English teaching can hardly be worth much unless they see education as a cradle-to-grave problem and one affecting millions of persons. So much of the writing about college English deals with the boys and girls we get, and says nothing about the vast number we might get—and probably will, after the war. In short, I should like to read some articles about what is probably the most pressing problem of all, the education of a nation and the place of English in that.

This is incoherent, I'm afraid, but I've just slapped down some ideas that have been pulling (dollar word) in my head. I hope the NEWS Letter will continue, in connection with the CEA. Once the war is over, great numbers of young people will have become sick of mechanism and what is now called 'realism', and will troop

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Beyond the Battle

As our armies and those of our Allies sweep across the old battlefields of Europe and the end of warfare draws once more in sight, we who have stayed with desk and chair and blackboard throughout the holocaust look about us anxiously for the return of those who left our classrooms years or months ago. I for one wonder what they will expect from college generally and more especially from the courses labeled "English."

One of my former colleagues now in Navy uniform has had as his duty the preparation of instructional materials for trainees, first in aviation, then in radar, and now in office personnel. From him and from other sources I gather that civilian instruction will have some things to learn from the men who have worked under the military pressures, where the battle and the preparation for it are the pay-off. And then I read what such stalwart academics as Norman Foerster and George F. Reynolds have to say about the role of the humanities in the post-war world, and I believe at least for the nonce that what the men returning will need—and want—most of all will be the solace and rejuvenation that come from communication with the timeless works of the great writers of all ages.

Perhaps in some sense we should prepare to go both ways at once. By that I mean that we who teach English in a world made conscious of our language as it never was before will need to be alert to new techniques of instruction, especially the use of phonic and visual materials and devices, and at the same time prepared to stress the values in belles-lettres. Perhaps too, we are custodians more than we realize of the responsibility for setting the tone for the achievement of a constructive and lasting peace, which will pretty certainly be a longer, if not a more difficult, task than the winning of the military victory. Of this I am certain, that the teacher of English will be, or at least can be, more important after the war than he was before.

Cecil B. Williams,
De Paul University.

into the classes in literature and the arts. We should be ready for them.

Robert M. Gay,

The Defense of Literature

The frequent references in the News Letter to possible hazards to literary courses in post-war curriculums indicate that many English teachers are thinking seriously of how their subject can be made to assume greater importance in the minds of curriculum-makers and students. This is indeed a serious matter for consideration, and the more thoroughly it is discussed the better. Through a full exchange of opinion there may be diffused throughout the educational world a proper conception of the place of literature in the development of an educated and civilized mind.

I should like to add my contribution to this discussion. For a proper conception of the significance of literature it seems to me a teacher can go to no better source than Matthew Arnold, who defined literature as "a criticism of life," and who, in his essay "Literature and Science," dealt with the very same situation that we now face—the situation created by the demand of the scientists and the technicians that they be allowed to furnish the staple of education. In this essay Arnold shows how the study of literature is indispensable in an educational program by pointing out, in his own way, that it is literature that gives meaning to science; that without the elements in the human mind that find expression in literature our lives would be completely empty, cold—in short, impossible; and that the function of literature is the refinement of our perceptions of life and experience, without which refinement we can not be considered educated, or even civilized. Not only in the essay mentioned, but in diverse other places, Arnold presents a broad and deep conception of the value of literature that seems to me to be superior to any other treatment of the sort.

The point of view that Arnold offers need not be adopted totally, but may well serve as a starting point for independent thinking by the teacher of literature. Once some such conception is arrived at, it will have value in the way we have in mind only in so far as it bears fruit, first, in the teacher's public support of his subject, and, second, in his teaching. We teachers of literature should be active in giving effective expressions to our faith in the educative importance of literature and to the rational basis of that faith. And in our teaching we must keep constantly before our eyes and the eyes of our students the view that literature is a record of "the best that has been thought and said in the world," so as to prevent the rise in the student's mind of any notion that the study of literature is a study of trifles and eccentricities in form and content; or the equally false notion that literary study is mainly a matter of literary evolution in the individual artist or from epoch to epoch. Let us give less attention to such things and place our primary emphasis upon what makes great lit-

erature truly great: the meanings that the finest and most sensitive minds of the ages have attached to human experience.

It is apparent that a study of world masterpieces, in translation to the extent necessary, has a better chance for success as an introductory course than the traditional survey of English literature, inasmuch as the teacher of world literature can keep to the level of the very best and can bring home more emphatically to the student the refining and civilizing function of literature.

Gilbert Macbeth,
Villanova College

For 1945?

English Composition—what it should teach, how it should be taught—has been widely discussed during the war years and has, on the whole, profited by the discussion. Literature has been less lucky. In spite of increased lip service to the importance of reading, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the multiplication of lists of "great" books, there is still no core of agreement apparent among college instructors in English as to what vernacular literature belongs in the company of the great; no movement, so far as college catalogues show, to reduce the teaching time given to the certainly not great.

These two things being true, a company of teachers such as makes up the body of readers of the News Letter might do worse in the year just ahead than to undertake the providing of tentative answers to some of the questions concerning content in undergraduate courses in literature. Any one question may be enough and more than enough for any one year, but here are three of the inescapables:

Is there any vernacular literature of such importance that every college student should be acquainted with it?

Is it expedient, with whatever college class, to use the trivial as a roadway to the great?

If it is, how far down that slope may college teachers go before their teaching ceases to be stimulus and becomes merely titillation?

Obviously these three are related questions and obviously, too, the last of the three may prove to be the first, since the clearing of ground is a preliminary to building. Observation of his own college catalogue, of his own courses, with an eye to discovery of the insignificant, is useful to any instructor. A report to colleagues—perhaps an anonymous one—on what such observation shows might well be useful to the whole profession. Especially it might be useful if givers of courses immediately questionable pointed out their justifications. For example:

English 22.—Cowboy Songs and Stories. That heading, taken from a college catalogue, has aroused in this News Letter reader a curiosity which so far goes unsatisfied. Why offered? To what variety of student? Toward what end? Displacing what other course? Calling for what prerequisites?

Edith R. Mirrielees,
Stanford University.

QUESTIONABLE TEXTBOOK STATEMENTS

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which might be attributed to a cantaloupe, or a baseball, or a steel ball bearing. Nothing in nature, or nothing that man can make is "round" in the absolute meaning used in mathematics.

The inherited "definitions" of the parts of speech are especially confusing to students. Texts used to begin the discussion of the parts of speech by saying that "words are divided into parts of speech on the basis of their use in the sentence." Then they followed with a group of definitions some of which were based upon meaning and some on sentence function. A typical definition of a noun from a recent text reads, "A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, quality, or idea." That seems to cover most of the ground! It is about as illuminating as the statement "The dog is a friend of man" to one who does not know the meaning of the word *dog*. Any classification is based upon recognizable similarities and differences. Words are alike or different in sound, length, origin, meaning, form habits, sentence function habits, etc. They may be classified into mono-syllables and poly-syllables, into words of Latin, Greek, or Anglo-Saxon origin, etc. But these are not grammatical classifications. Grammatical classification into parts of speech rests primarily upon the form habits of words and upon their general functional habits, or uses in sentences.

Instead of giving such definitions, it is a much better method to observe and record the forms and functions of words, classify them, and have the students write out descriptive paragraphs including their findings. At least, teachers should watch any definitions beginning, "A noun is . . ."

Understanding of transitive and intransitive verbs and of active and passive voice is made difficult by the usual text presentation: "A verb is transitive when it is used with an object to complete its meaning"; "A verb is intransitive when it does not have an object." Evidently, in the sentence, "The ball was struck by John," the verb is transitive, but it is not "used with an object to complete its meaning."

A more serious misuse of language leading to muddled thinking occurs in a recent text in the statement, "The active voice is that voice of a verb which tells that the subject of the verb does the action, as opposed to the passive voice, which tells that the subject is acted upon." The confusion of the word symbol with the thing symbolized is very common and is the source of much unfortunate opinion. The air this fall is full of examples of this confusion as politicians air their views. The confusion is in the phrases "the subject of the verb does the action," and "the subject is acted upon." The word *subject* is a grammatical term and refers to a word or a word-group. In the

sentence, "The large dog hit the boy," the subject is "the large dog," a group of words in a definite sentence function. This group of words did not "bite the boy." Another recent text shows this same confusion in the sentence, "A word is a concept, a combination of sounds which forms an independent unit of thought." One text, after a series of vague or inaccurate statements such as those quoted above, closes the section with the exhortation, "Use the exact word; say exactly what you mean."

V. O. COULTER,
University of Wyoming.

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ENGLISH AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

(Continued from Page 1)

tical life for the post-war generation will admit, I suppose, that business is practical. Very well, how are goods sold? Turn on the radio or read the advertising pages. No manufacturer expects to get anywhere by announcing that his soap is as cheap and as cleansing as any other. His sales-talks are full of semantic insinuations:—"rich, creamy, bubbling lather!"

suggesting superbyzantine luxury in the bath, a resulting beauty of complexion that will captivate the opposite sex. This is confessedly a low and selfish example of the use of language. The point is that even here, in the very temple of practicality, neither time nor money is spared to marshal all the resources of rhetoric. "Practical," I suppose, means tending toward success in a useful undertaking. When the English stood bare-handed on the beaches in 1940, would a restrained catalogue of facts and figures have helped them? Churchill thought otherwise, and stirred even the most sophisticated Oxford cynic to Spartan resolution. These random examples—and plenty more could be cited—all point one way. If language is to serve for communication between human beings, it cannot be cut down to a pidgin English level. It cannot, because men and women are extremely complex, and above the clatter of their daily existence, a keen ear can detect countless modifying overtones, some good, some bad . . . egotism, a feeling for beauty, suspicion of strangers, a faith in righteousness, and so on—which cannot be left out of any true picture of human life. Good writing brings home to the reader those overtones which his untrained senses are not acute enough to perceive in actual life. At its best it does this subtly without a parade of banners and military music. Swinburne and Walter Pater ("She is older than the rocks," etc., etc., ad lib.) do not stand up, on mature re-reading, as well as "She was a phantom of delight . . ." or Milton's dream of his dead wife: ". . . I woke, She fled. And day brought back my night."

Again I come back to the concrete. Does this mean that English teaching should point toward developing highly skilled poets and novelists? Nonsense! Few of any generation can reach anything like high skill. It does mean that the aim should not be consciously lowered but kept high, for everyone can—and must—be coaxed to go ahead, as far as possible, on this main highway of all learning. Other subjects may prove useful or superfluous through life's journey: this one is essential. Without the ability to understand the full meaning of what they read, the ability to express the full content of what they think and feel, our boys and girls will grow up into half-blind, tongue-tied men and women. The greater their mastery of language, the richer all the possibilities of their adult life.

How is all this to be accomplished? Like everything else

worthwhile, by hard work, by constant writing and reading. Did I say reading? Yes, I know, as well as you do, how deadening a required reading list can be. But it is deadly only when it is compounded with very little imagination and a great deal of tradition. "Classic" is a relative term. There are always plenty of interesting books deserving that rating for every age group. And they must be read. What would you think of a composer who set out to write a symphony before he ever heard an orchestra? Though text books on grammar and composition may help, it is the books which live for us that do the real teaching. Once under the spell of the best . . . the books almost but not quite beyond the reach of our comprehension . . . we no longer doubt whether the quest is worthwhile. What though our favorite authors seem unapproachable demi-gods . . . no matter! As best we can we stumble along in their footsteps.

This is half the battle. Not that work of any real value is ever the result of imitation, but it is only through imitation that the tools of any trade are mastered. The harder half remains to be fought. And not much help can come from the outside. All that good teachers can offer their pupils is encouragement, the reminder that others have stared at the blank paper before them with the same baffled hopelessness . . . and have found the way out. No one has put it better than Sir Philip Sidney:—

"Biting my tongue and pen,
beating myself for spite,
'Fool' said my muse to me,
'Look in thy heart and write!'"

The CEA will have a luncheon and afternoon meeting in conjunction with the meetings of the MLA in New York City on Wednesday, December 27th. Watch for further notices.

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